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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 006992

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND U.S. PARTY INSTITUTES ASSESS
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND DEVELOP DEMOCRATIC ACTION AGENDA

Classified by Ambassador Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) In a September 8 lunch hosted by the Ambassador, leaders of the assessment teams deployed by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) gave a soberly optimistic assessment of the September 7 presidential election and discussed next steps. Together, the party institute representatives, emboffs, and the Ambassador elaborated an action agenda to work on in the run up to the parliamentary elections and beyond. End summary.

A Flawed Process...

2. (C) Both party institute teams were in agreement that the September 7 process had been seriously flawed - with the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and its cadres omnipresent in every polling station. NDP cadres, rather than electoral officials and judicial supervisors, often appeared to be the ones in control of polling stations. Reflecting a low level of political/democratic awareness, many of the NDP activists openly discussed their violations with monitors. An NDI observer noted: "These people were very proud and happy to show us how efficient they were at delivering voters to the polls, and making sure they voted for Mubarak."

3. (C) Other serious problems outlined by IRI and NDI included the failure of election officials to make voter lists, and even information on designated polling sites, available equally to all competing parties. The NDP was well informed far in advance, they noted, while other parties didn't receive copies of the voter lists, or polling sites, until after the balloting started. The Presidential Election Commission (PEC), which regulated the process, "was the most powerful, isolated, and untouchable" electoral body any of the IRI team members, with combined experience observing 40 elections, had ever seen, the IRI team leader noted.

...But Clear Signs of Improvement

4. (C) In spite of the many flaws and difficulties, lunch guests told the Ambassador they found a number of encouraging signs from the September 7 experience indicating important steps toward democratic transition in Egypt. "The GOE deserves some credit," opined a member of the NDI team, acknowledging that the principle of multi-candidate elections now seemed firmly established, and that a significant increase in quantity and quality of public debate in Egypt was undeniable.

5. (C) Other guests noted that the conduct of the security forces during the election had been much better than they, and many of their Egyptian counterparts, had anticipated. Incidents between police and domestic monitors had been relatively isolated, and even in some of those cases, remedial action had been taken. While monitors' access to polling stations, following the PEC's very belated decision to allow them in, remained limited, the GOE had shown much more tolerance and acceptance of both the domestic monitors and the foreign assessment missions than either had expected, establishing an important precedent for future polls. Overall relations between NDI and the GOE were also faring better than had been expected, the NDI team leader told the Ambassador. Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit received him and an NDI team for a friendly meeting on September 7 and affirmed to him that, as far as the GOE was concerned, NDI was welcome in Egypt, though he urged the group to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs as an international NGO - a process NDI has already begun.

Looking Ahead

16. (C) The Ambassador, his guests, and emboffs agreed that although the September 7 vote left much room for improvement, there was no question that the election reflected tangible progress over previous elections and that there were many ways in which the USG and the party institutes could work together to help Egypt's democratic transition move forward. The first opportunity, they agreed, will be in Egypt's legislative elections, which will be held in three rounds in November and possibly December (dates to be announced). All agreed the GOE should take now a number of steps to improve the electoral process, which would constitute a joint action agenda for the USG and partners in the next six weeks and beyond. Steps the GOE should take include:

- Inviting international monitors to observe the process;
- Establishing an election commission more transparent and accountable than the PEC;
- Providing opposition parties with timely access to voter registration rolls and locations of polling stations;
- Moving those polling places still located in police stations to neutral sites such as schools or public health units;
- Tight regulation inside the polling stations to ensure a non-partisan atmosphere;
- Offering training (with international support) to judges serving as polling station supervisors;
- Replacing existing ballot boxes with transparent ones;
- Affirming the right (in a clear and timely fashion) of domestic monitors to participate fully in the process; and
- Reopening the registration process to enfranchise more citizens.

Comment

17. (U) As the luncheon broke up, members of both party institute teams expressed to the Ambassador their gratitude for the strong support and cooperation the Embassy and the Cairo USAID mission have provided in the past year.

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